

Houston Philosophical Society Minutes of 616th Meeting, March 15, 2007

President James L. Kinsey called the meeting to order at 7:50 PM. Guests were introduced. Jim Kinsey introduced the speaker: Composer Anthony Brandt, Associate Professor, Shepherd School of Music and co-founder and president of Houston's contemporary music ensemble, Musiqa. Professor Brandt spoke on "Making Music Modern."

Professor Brandt began by saying that cave men would recognize our physical being but would be bewildered by our world. Time and distance used to be very connected; now an email to China is delivered faster than a letter across town; but we adapt. Art explores the connection between that which changes very slowly and that which changes rapidly. Between 1900 and the present a seismic change occurred in music that has left the public bewildered, leading us to question how to understand its motivations and make sense of it. Causes of the change include:

1. The realization that the reality we experience is a small sliver of reality as we know it to be. Ambiguity is irrevocably built into nature as we know it, and the theory of relativity teaches us that there is no such thing as absolute simultaneity, no privileged perspective. Every observer is totally in authority as to what he observes. Because reality is relative to one's perspective, ambiguity is built into nature.
2. The Heisenberg uncertainty principle, which teaches that comprehensive knowledge is impossible; in the microscopic quantum world, speed or position can be known with absolute certainty, but not both.
3. Freud's teaching that aspects of life occur away from consciousness; the unconscious is 98 % of our mental activity.

These changes imply tremendous ambiguities. Reality is elusive, incomplete, and impossible to know with absolute certainty. The fabric of nature is ambiguity. Art in the twentieth century sought to heighten ambiguity. To make painting more abstract, you would remove the concrete representation, moving from Millet to Jackson Pollock. In literature, multiple perspectives are used to create more ambiguity.

Music is non-verbal and already very ambiguous. Two observers can have utterly opposed points of view. The question is how to make music pertinent. The central preoccupation of the twentieth century was to strengthen ambiguity in musical experience, which causes disturbance.

In the 'common practice era,' from Bach to Brahms, composers worked in a shared musical language. In the 20th century, music became a much more personal language with much more ambiguity, making it hard to figure out and creating friction. Schubert and Brahms, writing 70 years apart, used the same chords; but Stravinsky and Schoenberg had very little in common. Although Pierre Boulez and Steve Wright wrote works for two pianos at the same time, one is entirely repetitive and fixed in dynamic range, while the other has no repetition and is all over the place. The lack of communication between composers emphasizes individual personality, thus ambiguity.

Pulse lessens ambiguity and is very important to classical music. Taking pulse away is startling and instantly renders music more ambiguous, much more precarious perceptually.

Literal repetition used to establish musical identity, e.g., Tchaikovsky. Take it away, and music is much more elusive, e.g., Milton Babbitt. The observer is not as confident about the security of the material or

even sure there is a material. Rather, the composer goes to great effort to make the music a fleeting idea, as in Zen Buddhism where letting go of permanence, the only truth, is to learning to do without, keeping from getting attached to any one thing when all passes.

Another characteristic of 20th century music is unpredictable continuity. With Bach expectations are fulfilled. If they were always fulfilled, you would be bored, but if never met, you would feel cheated. With Stravinsky there is no clear pattern that creates an expectation through which the observer can see the future; any guess as to what will occur next is as good as any other. The situation is ambiguous.

Classical music guarantees clarity at the end, e.g., Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. By contrast, in Pierre Boulez, the violin holds one sound, but the other instruments bounce off of it, creating a certain degree of stability, but more instability. Two hundred years from now, the Boulez ending will not be Beethoven because it has ambiguity built into it. Tolerate it, celebrate it, and recognize it for what it is.

Classical music emphasizes the importance of structural markers to arrest the listener, e.g., the transition from Beethoven's fourth to fifth movement. Henri Dutilleux has no transition from the first to second movement, but rather silences and changes of texture throughout; themes are much blurrier. Hearers disagree as to where one movement ends and the next begins, acting out the effect of ambiguity.

Different interpretations of a single piece are similar with a Beethoven bagatelle. With Earle Brown's "December 1952," there are dramatic differences from one interpretation to the next; it is hard to identify as the same piece; the instruments, notes, and rhythm are all different, and the notation of the piece is so ambiguous it leaves interpretation wide open. The composer is not a dictator but an inspirer.

Listening to ambiguity places much greater pressure on the listener. When ambiguity is intensified, experience is much more personal, more intimate, even from one performance to the next, not shared. The music is built to encourage you to live with the privacy of your own thoughts and develop your own reaction. Ambiguity encourages giving the work the time to hear it through, to discover the richness in it rather than taking the food-tasting approach. This music is often seen as depriving us of things we love, but it may give us a gift. Resolution and clarity create release; ambiguity and uncertainty create tension. Twentieth century music is very tense, with no release. But we must live with uncertainty. To live only for the moment of clarity and release will entail only frustration. Twentieth century music invites a different emotional reaction.

Consciousness today is under assault. Others tell us what we should think, and it is very difficult to take charge. Twentieth century music says your perspective is as important as any one else's. No one dares tell you what music means. When we are more and more being focused towards certain ends, this music is very inspiring and necessary in its openness.

Research into music in the mind reveals it is a universal human gift. One view is that music is a world unto itself, not related to evolutionary survival; another, that music is a whole brain activity. Very few other things involve all the things we call up inside ourselves when we experience music. Music is very connected to what we experience when we experience life.

Professor Brandt's music appreciation course is available at cnx.org. He is directing Musiqa, the contemporary music ensemble, in concert April 28 and HPS members are invited to attend at half price.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:00 p.m.

Submitted, Evelyn Keyes, Recording Secretary